DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 225 231 EA 015 028

AUTHOR Smith, Louis M.; And Others
TITLE Kensington Revisited: Two Key Years of Context from the Milford Chronicle.
INSTITUTION Washington Univ., St. Louis, Mo.
SPONS AGENCY National Inst. of Education (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE Mar 82
GRANT NIE-G-78-0074
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New York, NY, March 19-23, 1982). For related documents, see EA 015 025-027.
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Historical Materials (060)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Administrator Role; *Board Administrator Relationship; Educational Change; *Educational History; Educational Innovation; Elementary Education; Experimental Schools; *Research Problems; School Districts; *Superintendents
IDENTIFIERS *Kensington School MO

ABSTRACT

In introducing a symposium on Kensington School (Missouri), an innovative elementary school in Milford School District, this paper discusses the origins of the restudy of Kensington 15 years after its creation and narrates the story of 2 key years in the district's history. The authors describe how a revisit to the district uncovered new historical data--many years of board minutes--and led to the followup study's expansion into a seven-volume study of innovation in American education aimed at finding why Kensington began as well as what happened to it. The 2 key school years, according to the authors, were 1961-62 and 1965-66. In the first key year, the Milford board attempted to oust its long-time superintendent, the National Education Association became involved, and the result was the hiring of a new superintendent, who was committed to educational innovation. Kensington was created as an innovative school soon thereafter. The second key year, the authors record, included board-superintendent conflict, a new Kensington principal, an electoral change in the board's membership, the superintendent's resignation, and the choice of a new superintendent. The authors' conclusion emphasizes the importance of history in studying educational change. (RW)

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Kensington Revisited: Two Key Years of Context From The Milford Chronicle

Louis M. Smith
Washington University

John J. Prunty
CEMREL, Inc.

David C. Dwyer
Far West Education Laboratory, Inc.

Paul F. Kleine
University of Oklahoma

This research has been supported by NIE Grant #G78-0074. This report represents official policy of neither NIE nor the Milford School District.

Presented as part of the symposium "Innovation and Change in American Education, Kensington Revisited: A 15 Year Follow-Up of an Innovative School and Its Faculty." AERA Annual Meeting, New York City, March, 1982.

EA 015 028

1. Background of the Study

In the first paper of a symposium it seems appropriate to speak to the origins of the idea. As with many events where several critical times and places can be identified, so it is with today's topic, Innovation and Change in American Education. Some fifteen years ago we had the opportunity to study the first year in the life of Kensington, a new elementary school in the Milford School District. It was a unique open space school designed to facilitate team teaching, individualized curriculum and instruction, pupil initiative and control of their own learning, and democratic relationships among the administration, teachers, and pupils. We reported on that year in a book entitled Anatomy of Educational Innovation (Smith and Keith, 1971).

A second critical time in the origin of the symposium occurred five years ago, here in New York at AERA. Matt Miles had asked me to speak on "Kensington Reconsidered" in the symposium "Case Studies in the Creation of New Schools". To talk about a study we had done a decade before when we had not been back to the school in years and when we had not seen most of the actors in a number of years seemed to be courting disaster. The initial thought of a quick and dirty alternative--visiting Kensington a time or two and telephoning some of the staff--began to look like a pot boiler type of project and these usually spelled trouble. I opted for a more general statement regarding our initial efforts and some changes in our perspective on key explanatory variables. But my curiosity had been piqued.

Third, at about that same time NIE was beginning a new strand of research support and issued a call for proposals on "Organizational Processes" open to an unusually broad range of possible ideas and methodologies. Case studies of schools, follow up studies, and concerns for innovation and change would all be welcome. Immediately the idea clicked. It was a simple one--return to Kensington for an ethnography of the school fifteen years later and hunt up the original faculty to find out what had happened to them. I tried it out on knowledgeable friends and to a person their eyes brightened and they indicated they thought it was a novel and good idea. The NIE review panel liked it and these last five years became an intellectual and emotional roller coaster ride which only now are coming to an end.

Once underway, the ideas and procedures took on a life of their own. It seemed reasonably straight forward to spend some time in the school and to start hunting for the former teachers and administrators. But we had promised NIE and had agreements with the current Superintendent to look at the context of the innovation and the reasons for any changes that had occurred in the school. That meant spending some time in the central office talking to people and checking out records such as the files of District Newsletters sent to the Patrons. In reading one of these, I commented in passing, to the current Superintendent, that there seemed to have been a bit of a hassle between the Board and the then Superintendent in the mid 1950's. He said something like "Oh yes, the Board almost fired him." We talked a bit more and he wandered off. A little while later he returned with a thick black bound book, which turned out to be a volume of school board minutes. He leafed through

and found the pages citing the bill of particulars against Superintendent McBride. I had a kind of non verbal, "Oh my god", reaction, that I suppose one has when panning for gold and a large nugget appears. Casually I asked, "Do you have more of these?" He said, "Yes, a whole closet full of them." I asked, "May I look at them?" He said, "Yes." I asked how far back they went and he said something like, "At least to the 1920's." We walked down the hall, opened the closet and the next two years of my life were taken care of. Most of my remarks today are based on data from these Board minutes, the official legal record of the Milford School District.

Because of this and a few other events somewhere along in the process amidst discussions with my colleagues, the project changed from "Kensington Revisited: A 15 Year Follow-Up of an Innovative Elementary School and Its Faculty" to be what it is now, a seven volume case study of "Innovation and Change in American Education."[1] As I phrased it to the Superintendent, "We are going to know more about Kensington and Milford than anyone has ever known about a district or ever will want to know." To all these changes and expansions of the effort he would nod in a low key way indicating they seemed reasonable, they would provoke no problems, they would be ok.[2]

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[1]Parenthetically, if any of you know a publisher who is looking for a seven volume set of books, please let me know.

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[2]Parenthetically also, our NIE Project Officer, Fritz Mulhauser, displayed similar interest and help at every point. But that's another story also.

Once one starts that process of reconstruing what it is that one is studying, and case studies seem particularly open to such thinking, the intellectual excitement, the tumbling out of ideas, and the creation of mountains of work seem to know no end. As part of this reconstrual we found that in addition to the original question, "What has happened to the innovative Kensington School?" has been added another, "Why did they build in a community like this in the first place?" In effect, where and how does this particular innovation fit into the more general evolution and change in the District? Historians typically tell a story or two to answer questions such as these. I would like to tell you about two eventful years in Milford, 1961-62 and 1965-66. They speak clearly to those questions.

2. Two Illuminating Years: 1961-62 and 1965-66

The drama within each of these two years, 1961-62 and 1965-66, and the interconnections between them we found illuminating regarding the fate of the innovative Kensington School--why it was created in the first place and what has happened to it subsequently.

In 1961, Superintendent McBride was 66 years old and in his 26th year as Superintendent. He had just been given, unanimously, a new three year contract. He had taken the Milford District from a small almost rural township district with one elementary school and a high school in the depression to a post WWII burgeoning suburban district with a new large high school, a junior high and eight elementary schools. A second junior high was underway and two elementary schools were in the offing. His career had been stormy and conflictual at

several points. In April of 1961, two new Board members were elected. They were forceful and persuasive men.

In April, just after the elections, the Board began stripping Superintendent McBride of his powers. The Assistant Superintendent and Business Officials were to report directly to the Board. In July, the Board voted unanimously requesting the Superintendent's resignation. He refused, in part because the Board would not pay the full two years salary remaining on his contract. In part also he was adopting a delaying tactic he had used a half dozen years earlier when he successfully fought off an earlier attempt by a strong Board President to oust him.[3]

In August, the minutes report a group of over 100 citizens attending the Board meeting and entering into the fray. That kind of citizen action was not unknown in Milford. The record shows recurring groups presenting grievances of all kinds.

In September, a new and major event occurred. The President of the CTA, Ron George, a young junior high school social studies teacher, wrote a letter to the NEA Professional Rights Committee asking for an impartial fact finding group to come to Milford. The letter succeeded. A two person committee agreed to come. The Board, which had been bypassed, was angry, but finally agreed to meet, informally, with the investigators.

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[3]That story and interpretation appears in detail in Volume I of our report, Chronicling the Milford School District.

The report from the NEA group, the first of its kind in Milford, made a half dozen recommendations, after a brief review of its investigation and its analysis of the problems:

1) Development of a Policy Manual applicable to all administrators, supervisors, and teachers.
2) One part would be "a set of approved personnel policies, including particularly a Fair Dismissal Policy." The latter would include written notice, an opportunity for improvement, and a hearing before final action.
3) Involvement of Board members, administrators, and teachers in the process.
4) Establish an office of Senior Consultant to the Board, equal in salary and coterminous with current contract.
5) "...secure the best qualified person available for the position of Superintendent of Schools. In view of the deep seated emotions that have developed over the present situation, it would be well to endeavor to find someone who has not been in any way involved in the present difficulties."
6) The new Superintendent should be "...a man who will have the personality to win confidence, the background to develop a program of quality education, the integrity to stand for what he and his staff deem important as well as carry out the specific decisions of the Board, and the ability to win the cooperation and devoted efforts of all those responsible for the program of the public schools in Milford."
7) To increase the likelihood of securing an able successor the report suggested setting up an ad hoc committee of several prominent educators to study the district, screen applicants and develop a short list of several candidates for the Board's final consideration.

The key point, in terms of the Kensington School as an innovation, was the Board's hiring of two prestigious Superintendents to develop a short list of outside applicants. On the list was Dr. Steven Spanman, a young man with a Ph.D. from a prestigious university who later would be described as an individual "who could talk the birds out of the trees." He convinced four of the six Board members that he was the person for the job; he became Superintendent. His connections with prestigious

people in the new elementary education, team teaching, individualized curriculum and instruction, non gradedness, and with people interested in open space buildings were activated before he arrived in Milford.

That same Spring, of 1962, the Board split 3-3 on a motion to fire Ron George, the young social studies teacher and the CTA President. The minutes ran this way:

> Mr. Henderson moved that Junior High School teacher, Ronald George, not be re-employed for the school year 1962-63, because of his contemptuous attitude toward Board members, his irrational behavior in public, and his totally unprofessional behavior. Mr. Osborn seconded the motion. Messers. Henderson, Osborn, and Tompkins voting "yes" and Messers. Wilkerson, Baskin, and Quigley voting "no." The motion failed.
>
> (Tie vote on re-employment automatically fails) (4/10/62)

As one colleague commented jokingly in an interview, "If they had phrased it as "rehiring" he would have been out."

In a sense, we have answered our first question, "Why did the innovative Kensington School get built?" A complex set of events occurred: a conservative community, a Superintendent of 25 years at the end of his career, severe conflict in the community and the Board with the "progressive" group winning control for the moment, an active CTA president, a responsive NEA committee making thoughtful and plausible compromise recommendations, an outside superintendent screening committee related to the national network, producing a prestigious and national short list, the persuasive Steven Spanman being one of these.

By 1965-66, the Kensington School had been built. It's a fascinating story in itself: 1962-63 the planning year, 1963-64 the building year, 1964-65, the first year of the school, and 1965-66, the principal and most of the teachers depart. But it's still the superintendency, board, and community story I want to relate. In 1965, Spanman had a "him or me" fight with Mr. Wilkerson, the Board President, who stepped down from the presidency but not from the Board. Later Spanman was to describe this as "winning the battle but losing the war."

In April of 1965, the Board elections occurred. Mr. Wilkerson, the "you or me" incumbent, who had resigned as Board President, won handily. Another incumbent, one of Spanman's supporters, ran a poor fourth. Mr. Reeves, the newly elected Board member would join Wilkerson in a series of 4-2 losing votes during the year. Among the issues were the renewal of Spanman's contract for three years and a leave of absence to accept a prestigious National Foundation fellowship. On the latter, the Board minutes contained this item:

> Mr. Wilkerson requested that the minutes show that his reason for voting "no" was that he preferred the Superintendent's resignation rather than granting a leave of absence. (6/6/65)

Mr. Ranson became Acting Superintendent. The year moved quickly until the Spring of 1966.

In the Spring of 1966, the events were these. First, Eugene Shelby, Principal of the Kensington School, resigned in February, 1966 effective a month later. Mr. Reeves moved with Mr. Wilkerson seconding the appointment of Michael Edwards as Principal. Edwards spot as Principal of the Field School was filled by none other than Ron George,

former CTA President, who had acquired a Ph.D. in the interim from City University. The votes were unanimous. Second, in the two month period, April and May, the Board held ten meetings. On the day of the elections, the Superintendent telegraphed a request to be released from his contract. The Board unanimously agreed. One of Spanman's supporters had decided not to run for office; another ran third. Two new conservatives were elected. Another of Spanman's supporters, Mr. Henderson, tendered his resignation as of the first of May. Another had decided to do the same but changed her mind. The two conservatives, Wilkerson and Reeves, vied for the presidency through six votes. Finally they both stepped aside and Mr. Edmond became President.

All personnel decisions--junior and senior high school principalships and assistant principalships were stymied on 3-3 votes. In May, when Board member Henderson's resignation was effective, the Board voted down Mrs. Harcourt's nominee 2-3 and elected Mr. Wilkerson's candidate 3-2. A week later on a series of 4-2 votes, the Board moved the High School Principal to the Junior High School, moved the Junior High School Principal to the Central Office,and put a new man in the High School on a one year contract. A week later, the regular meeting of Tuesday, May 24th was just that. Bills were paid, architectural plans moved forward, resolutions of appreciation for the recently departed Board members were made and passed, a contract was let for re-roofing one of the buildings, and so on. Three Assistant Principals were offered contracts. Late in the evening the President called for a special meeting three days later:

> ...for the purpose of interviewing candidates for the superintendency. (5/24/66)

The tenth and last meeting of the busy two month period occurred Friday evening, May 27th, at 8:00 P.M. The Board had received applications from five individuals from outside the District. None of these made the short list to be interviewed. The four internal candidates were:

1) Mr. Ranson, currently Acting Superintendent
2) Mr. Eastman, long term teacher/administrator, formerly high school principal, currently central office administrative director of school organization
3) Mr. Eads, long term teacher/administrator, currently principal and director of maintenance
4) Dr. Ronald George, former teacher/CTA president, recently made elementary principal.

After a series of individual interviews and discussions, Mrs. Harcourt moved that Mr. Ranson be appointed. The motion lost 2-4. Then:

> Mr. Wilkerson moved that Dr. Ronald George be appointed Superintendent, effective July 1, 1966, for a period of one year at a salary of $16,750. Mr. Tuley seconded the motion. (5/27/66)

The motion carried 4-2. The new conservative coalition had started a new era, an era which lasts until today.

It seemed a far cry from the resolution four years before, that is:

> ...Ronald George, not be re-employed for the school year 1962-63, because of his contemptuous attitude toward Board members, his irrational behavior in public, and his totally unprofessional behavior... (4/10/62)

The threads that hold social structures together and the slight if not chance events that determine large sequences of events are reflected in Mr. Wilkerson, a supporter of Mr. George in 1962, was the only Board

member from the earlier time. He nominated George for Superintendent. Just a month before, Mr. Henderson had resigned from the Board. In 1962 he had voted to fire Mr. George.

Our story has come full circle. A highly critical Board had voted to fire Superintendent McBride in 1961. A large and bitter fight occurred. Ron George, a junior high social studies teacher and President of the CTA, backed McBride and brought an NEA committee into the District. This earned him the wrath of the innovative Board and almost cost him his job. These activities and interactions led to outside consultants, a more cosmopolitan short list and the hiring of Steven Spanman, Superintendent, "a man who could talk the birds out of the trees." The District jolted differently, that is innovatively. To the majority it was a forward and better movement; to others it was ill advised. The community patrons were increasingly in the group perceiving the changes as "ill advised." The Board changed by votes and by resignations. The 4-2 majority eventually became a 2-4 minority. One might ask, is our episode one of school chaos, vulnerability, or political democracy?

3. Conclusion

One way to state conclusions in field research is to try to answer the question, "What have we learned from the effort?" The answers cut across the personal and the professional, the methodological and the substantive, and the domains of education and social science.

First, as one of my colleagues commented upon our excitement in an earlier conversation--"Lou, you've discovered history." That's an

important personal learning. I believe it's more important than that and that educational studies among others would profit from a similar discovery.

Second, the discovery of history, in part, has led us to models of explanation that move away from Deductive Nomothetic and Inductive Statistical models to telling stories as explanation, a kind of historical and contemperaneous configurational or concatenated approach. If you like we've gone from Hempel (1942 and 1965) and Feigl (1945) to Scriven (1959), Hexter (1971), and Geertz (1971).

Third, the telling of stories has focused us on individuals with political interests and sentiments, acting and interacting with one another as the "mechanisms" of educational change. To us this implies a contextualist world view or root metaphor as Pepper (1942) would phrase it or a dramaturgical model as Sarbin (1977) and earlier Goffman (1959) might have phrased it. Settling in here and knowing why we have settled here is a major outcome of this research, and an extension of some of our earlier work.

Fourth, I believe that innovations, even those as large and grand as Spanman conceived and implemented in Milford and Kensington, when looked at over the long perspective become one more item in the history and evolution of a school district. As such they lose some of their

vividness and drama when viewed in the context of other items: initiating of the high school in 1927 with Mrs. Briggs, the building of ten schools in ten years under Mr. McBride, or the restructuring and closing of several schools as Dr. George has done recently.[4]

Fifth, as we have watched the Board of Education, the central office staff, the principals and teachers, and the groups of parents and patrons struggle with these issues and hundreds of smaller ones over the last sixty-five years we have been struck with the multiple aspects of educational innovation. The items come and go, receive trials of various sorts, are adapted and modified and gradually become submerged into the community's point of view. Technological models and theories seem to fold into organizational models and theories and these into political models and theories and these ultimately submerged into a cultural perspective. But running through all of them we find ourselves thinking in terms of a symbolic interactionist approach. Putting all this together in some sensible useful form is the last part of our agenda. In a sense we are critiqueing and resynthesizing a perspective raised by House (1979).

Sixth, I personally see McBride, Spanman, and George, the Superintendents from 1935 until now, as giants of schoolmen. Making simple judgments of good and bad becomes terribly difficult. McBride was a localist, politician, autocrat for 27 years. Spanman was a cosmopolitan, innovative, imaginative, educational entrepreneur for four years. George is a responsive localist, servant of the Board and the patrons,

[4]These items appear in detail in Volumes I and II of our longer final report to NIE.

still going strong after 15 years. Each, in his own way, has made major contributions to the development of the Milford District, and each has generated strong support and strong opposition among staff, board, and patrons.

Finally, we hope our research has created images of schooling, of roles and positions, of actions and interactions, and of individual men and women which other educators and citizens can look at, think about and try out for themselves. In so doing we hope and believe that they will find the process educating and liberating as they make their own personal and professional choices toward the kind of life they want to lead, the kind of schools they want to have, and the kind of education they want to provide for the youth of their community.

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